



STEP BY STEP

NAVIGATING BOYHOOD
IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA



Acknowledgments

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The authors wish to thank the interviewees and survey participants who spent valuable time sharing their expertise and experience on boys and boyhood across different contexts in sub-Saharan Africa.

Many thanks also to Begoña Fernandez and the entire Together for Girls team for generously collating and sharing data from Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys. Our gratitude also to Yuli Ketain Meiri and the Children's Worlds (International Survey of Children's Well-Being [ISCWeB]) team. The data used in this publication come from multiple waves of Children's

Worlds project: An international survey of children's lives and well-being (www.isciweb.org). The views expressed here are those of the authors. They are not necessarily those of ISCWeB.

The report builds on the excellent work done by qualitative researchers, Suzanne Clulow and Josiane Ngo Mayack, who supported the data collection and analysis in English and French respectively. Thanks also to Scott Brauer for supporting the literature review in English. We are grateful to Roma Richardson for overseeing the production of this report. Thank you to Charmaine Smith and Florentine Kabasinga who did the copyediting in English and French respectively, Auguste Mfouapon who did translation, and Jive Media Africa who did the design and layout of this report.

And finally, many thanks to the flexible and generous support of an anonymous donor for funding this study.

Suggested citation

Equimundo. (2023). *Step by step: Navigating boyhood in sub-Saharan Africa*. Equimundo.

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About Equimundo

Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice works to achieve gender equality and social justice by transforming intergenerational patterns of violence and promoting patterns of care, empathy, and responsibility among boys and men throughout their lives. Equimundo is the next phase of Promundo-US, which grew out of Instituto Promundo in Brazil. Based on community work and evidence generated from Instituto Promundo to engage men and boys in gender equality with a focus on Brazil and Latin America, Promundo-US was established in 2011 as a legally independent organization to work with partners globally. Equimundo has worked in collaboration with different partners to promote gender equality and prevent violence in more than 40 countries around the world through high-impact research and

evaluations, advocacy efforts and the implementation of evidence-based educational and community programs. Our evidence-based, modeled initiatives seek to create change at multiple levels: in addition to working with individual men and women, we use local campaigning and activism to advocate with institutions and governments for the adoption of policies and the scaling up of programs that strengthen and expand programs that reinforce personal and social change. Currently, Equimundo works in partnership with civil society organizations, governments, and multilateral development agencies internationally and in the United States. We choose partners who share our commitment to responsibility, compassion, social justice, and gender equality.

For more information, see www.equimundo.org.

About the Global Boyhood Initiative

Coordinated by Equimundo in partnership with Plan International and core global partner Gillette, the Global Boyhood Initiative (GBI) aims to support boys aged 4–13, the adults in their lives and the institutions they inhabit in advancing healthier concepts of boyhood. Co-founded by Equimundo and the Kering Foundation, GBI is a

first-of-its-kind initiative to promote healthy masculinities starting from an early age, using approaches specifically developed to engage boys, and by leveraging appropriate media to inform and mobilize the communities and systems that influence and shape boys' development.

For more information, see: www.boyhoodinitiative.org.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACRW	African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
ASRH	Adolescent sexual and reproductive health
CSE	Comprehensive sexual education
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ECD	Early childhood development
GBI	Global Boyhood Initiative
IDI s	In-depth interviews
ILO	International Labor Organization
IMAGES	International Men and Gender Equality Survey
ISCWeB	International Survey of Children's Well-being
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and more
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SBCC	Social and behavior change communication
SOGI	Sexual orientations and gender identities
SRGBV	School-related gender-based violence
SRH	Sexual and reproductive health
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
STEM	Science, technology, engineering, and maths
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VACS	Violence Against Children Surveys
VYA	Very Young Adolescence (VYA 2.0) program
WMD	Weapons of mass destruction

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Reaching gender equality must, and has, involved efforts to understand the vulnerabilities and risks that girls face every day that includes learning about the realities of boys. Childhood and early adolescence are key periods where ideas about gender equality can become ingrained, as individuals of all gender identities form attitudes, opinions and beliefs – about themselves, about their identity, and about their place in the world. By exploring the

lived realities of boys aged 8–13 in sub-Saharan Africa, this report emphasizes that a holistic approach to advancing gender equality must include both girls and boys, engaging boys as allies to achieve gender equality and as supporters of girls' agency and women's empowerment, as well as the importance of addressing the specific health and social development needs of boys themselves.

In sub-Saharan Africa, current research and programming on gender and masculinities often lack a specific focus on boys aged 8–13.

There is an established body of literature from the early childhood development field focused on the ages of 0–3, and there is also a robust body of literature focused on adolescents and older men and women from the lens of sexual and reproductive health. However, the very

young adolescent age group of around 8–13 years is a critical time in the lives of young boys and girls forming their notions of gender roles and identities that is often missing in the literature and not a strong focus in programming.

This mixed-methods report builds on findings from a rapid literature review and from an online survey and in-depth interviews with researchers and practitioners in sub-Saharan Africa to outline some of the key issues boys face in the region.

Building on existing data and reports and with new qualitative and quantitative data from experts in the field, the report describes the landscape of challenges and expectations that boys face as they grow older across

sub-Saharan Africa, including growing disengagement from schools and education, gendered use of violence against children, the pressures of child labor, and normative expectations around growing up to be strong and

self-reliant. What interviewees and survey respondents find missing in current research and programming on boys are also summarized in this discussion. The report then delves deeper on what some common sources of learning about masculinities are for young boys in this region, and how

masculinities are formed in specific precarious settings like in urban informal settlements. Finally, the report highlights the aspirations of boys as perceived by activists, researchers, and program staff who work with boys in the region.

In particular, schools are environments where boys, just like girls, face gendered challenges to thriving and keeping enrolled. Schools are often sites where boys experience gendered patterns of violence, corporal punishment, and pressures to work that lead them to drop out.

Globally, and in sub-Saharan Africa, boys have been increasingly performing more poorly in schools and dropping out from schools at higher rates than girls (with girls continuing to face greater threats to their rights and having fewer resources and opportunities overall). Recent data published by UNESCO and the World Bank describe in detail how the combination of experiencing harsh corporal punishment, pressures of needing to work and provide for the family, and gender norms that discourage boys' education are leading

to a pattern where boys are much more likely to be represented in gender gaps within educational attainment across Africa. Schools are also not the only place where boys face gendered violence. Many norms that justify the use of harsh physical punishment against boys in school are also held in homes and communities and continue to affect both the prevalence of violence against children and boys, while discouraging disclosure and discussion of such violence.

Despite the structural challenges that await boys as they grow older, boys also harbor many varied aspirations for their own lives and contend with conflicting expectations from their peers, families, and society on what to become.

Ideas on what it means to grow up as a man vary across settings and are influenced by boys' own caregivers and families, peer groups, social media, and institutions like schools. In particular, the report delves into how such ideas of masculinities can be fluid and contentious in precarious settings, such as urban informal settlements, where the reality of needing to provide for basic necessities like food and shelter on a

daily basis can reinforce the need for boys to be strong and self-reliant. How boys and girls of this age are initiating romantic relationships while navigating norms around intimate relationships that are held by their peers and families is another key source of learning and contending with gender roles that is explored in this report.

The report summarizes how programs with boys currently address or don't address the needs of boys as raised by those we spoke to.

In the undertaken survey and interviews, respondents shared what they felt was currently missing from both research and programs that focus on boys of ages 8–13. Examples of programs from the literature review, interviews, and survey

are briefly summarized to highlight some patterns in programmatic work with boys of this age group currently ongoing in sub-Saharan Africa and also flag what needs are currently not being sufficiently met.

Overall, more formative research and gender-transformative programming that include voices of boys themselves are needed to achieve the full equality of women and girls, and to positively impact the lives of boys themselves.

Across all sources included in this report, there was a unified need expressed for more research to be done on the specific needs and aspirations of boys ages 8–13. When it comes to programming, the need for gender-synchronized programming and for more intersectional approaches that do not treat boys as a monolith but seek to understand the specific needs

of boys of different backgrounds was overwhelming expressed. In particular, work with children of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (SOGI) is still rare, and future gender programming will need to strengthen their content to address the specific needs of SOGI-diverse children more effectively.

It should be noted that this report reflects the experiences and expertise of researchers, program staff, and activists who work with young boys and girls, and these are not the voices of boys and girls themselves.

Further research is needed to further contextualize the recommendations presented in this report by including the

voices of young children themselves and their lived realities.



INTRODUCTION

Why this report?

There has not been enough of a focus on younger boys from the perspective of engaging them in active allyship for gender equality.

Nearly half of all people living in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) are younger than 14 years old.¹ The continent's young population has for years been the focus of discussion on how best to realize this “demographic dividend,” usually with the twin goals of economic development and poverty reduction. Within masculinities and gender studies in SSA, the conversation often starts from men's and boys' sexual and reproductive

health, and the prevention of HIV and AIDS. This has resulted in a somewhat skewed focus on older boys and men and conceptualizing masculinities fundamentally as a problem that needs to be addressed, rather than a broader conversation of how to engage men and boys in allyship for gender equality and healthy, positive versions of masculinities.

Younger adolescent boys are still an under-discussed topic when it comes to this region, as is true elsewhere in the world.

The hopes, ambitions, and dreams of boys of ages 8 to 13; how they form and internalize masculine ideals, roles, and behaviors; as well as the structural challenges and everyday fears, trials, and tribulations young boys face can sometimes be missing from narratives on masculinities. By the time they become teenagers, most children have already started to internalize messages from society on what girls and boys,

men and women are supposed to be. To meaningfully question and subvert gender stereotypes, the process of critical reflection needs to start early. With this understanding and with a goal of shining a spotlight on the gender socialization of younger boys, Equimundo and the Kering Foundation started the Global Boyhood Initiative (GBI) in 2020.² This report is part of the ongoing research within GBI.

¹ According to the World Bank, 42% of the population in sub-Saharan Africa in 2021 were 0–14 years old.

² For the latest news and updates from the Global Boyhood Initiative, visit: <https://boyhoodinitiative.org>.

This mixed-methods report seeks to fill a gap in our understanding of what growing up and coming of age look like for younger boys in SSA.

The report includes findings from a literature review of peer-reviewed academic sources as well as technical reports and practice-based knowledge sources to understand trends in the field and inform primary data collection. The literature review was supplemented with eight qualitative in-depth interviews with senior researchers, program staff, and advocates who work on children's rights and masculinities across different countries in the region.

Over 40 researchers, activists, and practitioners also shared their experiences and expertise on the

topic through an online survey. Finally, secondary data from the Violence Against Children Surveys (VACS), generously shared by the team at Together for Girls, and survey data from the International Survey of Children's Well-being (ISCWeB) shared by the Children's Worlds team, helped contextualize findings on children's experiences of violence and measures of general well-being in the region. For a more detailed description of the methodology used in this report, please see [Annex 1](#).

Box 1 A brief comment on terms used and on the diversity of boys

A brief comment on terms used and on the diversity of boys

Throughout the report we use "SSA" when taking a step back and drawing conclusions or lessons at a macro level. Wherever possible, we cite specific countries from where a program or case study might be drawn as an example. The term "sub-Saharan Africa" nonetheless has problematic connotations and can be used to oversimplify and flatten a vast and varied set of countries and contexts. Even within the same countries and states, the lives and experiences of boys differ profoundly based on their relative income or poverty status, rural or urban residence, access to education, prospects of employment, religious and cultural settings, living with disability, and so on. It is with this awareness and understanding that we still attempt to find common threads with lessons and ideas that advocates, activists, program staff, and researchers working with young boys on gender equality may find useful.

Current research on boys in SSA

Research on boys between the ages of 8 and 13 is still in its early stages.

The focus of the early childhood development (ECD) field on ages 0–3 has meant there is a robust literature on children's growth and needs in this age range. Similarly, there is extensive research from the sexual and reproductive health (SRH) field focused on puberty, adolescence, and young adulthood, which includes teenagers and older men and women. The age

group of 8 to 13 has so far not been a priority within research on masculinities and gender. However, young adolescence is a critical time when boys and girls begin to form their own identities based on social expectations of their roles (Meeus et al., 2010). In more recent years, this age group has gradually been getting more attention within the literature.

With increasing interest, there are several sources of data on topics related to young adolescent lives.

Recent high-quality sources of gender data in the region include the VACS that are periodically conducted by national governments in coordination with the **Together for Girls** partnership. However, it should be noted that VACS data are collected from 13–24-year-olds, which is a slightly older age range than is the focus of this report. **Childline** in South Africa also publicly share their analysis and data from their helpline that describe the calls they receive from survivors, disaggregated by gender, type of child protection issue, province, and

region, and so on. The **International Survey on Children's Well-being** (ISCWeB) includes data from 6–14-year-olds in Ethiopia, Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa, and Uganda across different waves of the survey; and children's own reports of their well-being, time use, and satisfaction with life. Recent global landscape reports by **UNESCO** and the **World Bank** on boys' disengagement from education also aggregate in-depth data on learning outcomes for girls and boys of primary and secondary school ages across the region.³

3 For more on VACS data, visit: <https://www.togetherforgirls.org/violence-children-surveys/>. ISCWeB data are available at: <https://iscweb.org/>. Reports by Childline can be found here: <https://www.childlinesa.org.za/publication-types/helpline-reports/>. The global studies on boys' education by UNESCO (2022) and the World Bank (Welmond & Gregory, 2021) are included in the references.

Avoiding a zero-sum game or pitting girls' needs against boys' needs

It is important to highlight here that focusing on boys should not mean diminishing the focus on girls. As the 2020 African Report on Child Wellbeing demonstrates, discrimination against girls continues to be prevalent in both law and everyday life, with girls being 25 percent more likely than boys to be living in poverty, having lower enrolment rates in school, being excluded from inheriting property, and facing greater constraints and experiencing less freedom in decision-making around their sexual health and mobility (African Child Policy Forum, 2020). Instead, the spotlight on boys should highlight the same underlying harmful gender norms and environmental constraints that negatively impact girls and boys. Understanding gendered impacts of these structural barriers can help design policies and programs to better serve and expand opportunities for children of all gender identities.

Some cases of research on boys can unfortunately run into the trap of pitting girls and boys against each other. In the current context of cancel culture and immense backlash

against proponents of gender equality, there is a need to be conscious about how boys' specific needs, concerns, and challenges are framed in the public discourse. A content analysis covering two decades of media reports in Kenya describes how nuanced and sometimes contradictory the public conversation on "neglect of the boy child" can get. The same concerns over boys being left out of research, programming, and policy for children can come from different ends of the spectrum of attitudes toward gender equality.

Feminist activists are concerned about the exclusion of boys and men, as they see this being directly linked to maintaining the patriarchal status quo that leads to the continuation of violence against women and girls as well as against boys and men. At the same time, anti-feminist voices who form the backlash against any progress toward gender equality use similar language around exclusion of boys to refocus the attention on boys and men and protest against the perceived loss of power and status caused by the gender

equality movement (Pike, 2020).

A case in point is the 2015 Status of the Boy Child Report by the National Gender and Equality Commission in Kenya that describes the ways in which boys are left behind by gender equality policies and programs. Many of the report's recommendations on strategies to ensure boys stay in school, or suggestions for including boys and men in programs that typically only target women and girls, will likely benefit all children. However, some of the conclusions and recommendations in the report lack a gender-transformative lens and seem to pit girls and boys against each other or view progress on gender goals as zero-sum (National Gender and Equality Commission, 2015). While it is no doubt useful to understand the specific gendered exclusions and deprivations that girls and boys face, synchronizing approaches to gender equality to include children and adults of all gender identities will be most effective in transforming gender norms and reducing structural barriers that impact everyone in different extents.

When we asked our survey respondents what was missing in the research on boys, most respondents said that there was “not enough focus on boys’ specific challenges.”

About one in five respondents also chose that the research was too strongly focused on “negative or harmful versions of masculinity.” Some respondents chose the “other” option to share topics that were not in the list of response options. These write-in

responses included topics like raising boy children, and talking about specific forms of abuse that boys face. The survey responses on this question are summarized below. Respondents were able to choose more than one option when answering this question.

Box 2 (opposite page)
Avoiding a zero-sum game or pitting girls’ needs against boys’ needs

Table 1 Survey responses on missing topics from research on boys

What is most missing in the research on boys in your context?	Percentage (%) (n = 40)
Not enough focus on boys’ specific challenges	27.5
Focused too strongly on negative or harmful versions of masculinity	17.5
Missing important topics like LGBTQIA+ rights and issues	12.5
Too broad and lacking depth or nuance	10.0
Too narrow focus on a specific age group, setting, or country	5.0

The interviewees we spoke to brought up the particular age group of 8–13 years in itself as a reason for gaps in the literature.

Data collection methods are often designed for very young age groups, like observational studies, or for older groups who can understand and respond to survey questions more easily. This is one reason that getting ethical approval for research, especially on topics such as sexuality and sexual and reproductive health with young adolescents, emerged as a theme in the qualitative interviews. A senior researcher based in **South Africa** described in their interview

that ethics committees often find that these topics are “*invasive, sensitive, and not appropriate to explore with young children*” and may not approve research studies looking to engage very young adolescents on topics of gender and sexuality. In recent years, this is shifting slowly with research teams across Kenya and South Africa conducting participatory research with age-appropriate methods, and with the inclusion of child development experts in the research design.

Box 3 Interview responses on what is missing from research on boys in SSA

Interview responses on what is missing from research on boys in SSA

Parenting, including the effects of harsh discipline on boys

Raising boys in single-parent households

Sexual violence against boys, especially younger boys

The role of religion in contributing to masculinities

Violence against boys

Impact of social media on children's ideas of gender

1

Subjects and topics

Sex and sexuality, including consent

Sexual orientation, LGBTQIA+ rights, impact of homophobia and transphobia on boys

Teaching boys about fatherhood

Mentorship for boys

Highly vulnerable groups such as stateless boys or boys on the move

Emotional well-being and mental health

Role of men in social cohesion

Cultural rites and their impact on boys' education

The interviewees also mentioned educational content on diverse sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) and fatherhood and parenting as missing topics in research on boys.

In terms of approaches, positive, strengths-based, or solutions-focused approaches were deemed to be missing. In terms of interventions, program strategies other than information-sharing or awareness-raising were called for, and research on scaling up existing programming were mentioned as missing from the evidence base. The responses to this survey question

Solutions-focused approaches:
telling boys what they can be rather
than what they should not be

2

Approach and audience

Programs that focus
on the humanizing of
men away from the
deindividuation of
men

Discussions on how men and boys
are also constrained by gender
roles in conversation with people
of all genders

A focus on
boys younger
than 13

What additional layered services can be
added to programming for boys beyond
information sharing

3

Implementation modalities

Learn from what is already being done
with boys to support scaling up

are summarized in the box below. An important note here is that any future research on the topic of SOGI-diverse children and their rights must be done with caution. Transphobia and homophobia are still prevalent in many contexts, and research findings or data points that highlight the exclusion or marginalization of trans- or

homosexual children and adolescents can exacerbate this problem. Working in partnership with LGBTQIA+ organizations and ensuring that such topics are dealt with sensitively in research and programming are key to avoid further marginalizing of SOGI-diverse children.



STEPPING OUT INTO THE WORLD

The sun rinses
out its body after
a warm bath
in a sea of smoke.
The swallows have
averred commitment
to the infant day —
the swallows have
aired it to the forest.
The school bells peal
to unearth the lashes
buried in my buttocks —
the school bell
forces the trees
in my chest to give
up their leaves.

From **Lukpata Lomba Joseph's** *"Ukelle Boy"*

This section describes how, as boys come of age across sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), a host of challenging realities await them.

Using insights from the literature review, interviews, and survey, this section describes the various factors that contribute to boys' growing disengagement from education, including unwelcoming school environments, economic pressures to work and earn income, and the prevalence of corporal punishment. Even outside of schools, boys are at risk

of experiencing gendered patterns of violence whether in their homes or in the broader community and in public spaces. Young adolescence can already be a complex and confusing age for children to navigate, and for many boys in SSA these contextual realities make them especially vulnerable to harm and neglect.

Despite progressive legislation on children's rights in the region, enforcement and provision of these rights can be limited.

The rights of boys and girls in SSA are protected under the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), which has been ratified by 47 of 54 members of the African Union. The ACRWC recognizes anyone under the age of 18 as a child and explicitly protects a child's rights to freedom of expression; to an education; and to protection from child labor, child abuse, and sexual exploitation (African Union, 1990). However, as a respondent during the interview noted, the degree to which governments are able to enforce the charter and protect children's rights differs greatly across the region, depending on the state's political stability, the availability of resources, macro trends like the impact of climate change, and the general value placed on children's rights by the society and the political classes in that state.

Despite its [ACRWC's] ratification by most countries, it is not always respected in the sense that there are rights recognized in the charter that are not achievable

for children, such as the right to education. Not all children have the right to education, health, a life free from violence, etc. This is due, for me, in part to the fact that the state is not present or able to provide all the services specific to the state. But also, more and more the state is weakened because of insecurity, because of climate change that also pushes on the pressure on resources. So, there is an inability to meet all the needs of children. The other issue is that the conception of children's rights is not always the same in the communities as what is found in the legal texts. There are also systems parallel to the state, such as the customary judicial system, which will sometimes apply a different law from that found in the texts. So, for me in terms of boys' rights, there are often situations where their rights are not respected for these reasons that I mentioned.

– Program staff in West Africa, female

Schools can be unwelcoming to boys

In SSA, as in many parts of the world, boys are disengaged from schools and education at higher rates than girls.

While primary enrolment rates in some countries may continue to show gender gaps favoring boys, their performance after enrolment is significantly worse relative to girls. Boys tend to underperform on reading, repeat grades, and drop out at higher rates than girls in many parts of the world, including in Africa. Even on primary enrolment, **The Gambia** and **Senegal** are two examples of countries where over the past two decades the trend in primary enrolment rates has shifted from favoring boys to girls. In the Gambia, there were 88 girls enrolling into primary school for every 100 boys

in 2000; but by 2019, this had reversed to 90 boys enrolling for every 100 girls. In Senegal, pre-2000, boys dropped out at much lower rates than girls, but this had reversed by 2019 – only about 88 boys were enrolled in primary education for every 100 girls (UNESCO, 2022). These patterns can also disguise apparent improvements in gender parity indices. For instance, the gender gaps in enrolment rates in some cases are closing not because girls are being able to enroll and stay in school for longer, but because more boys are dropping out faster.

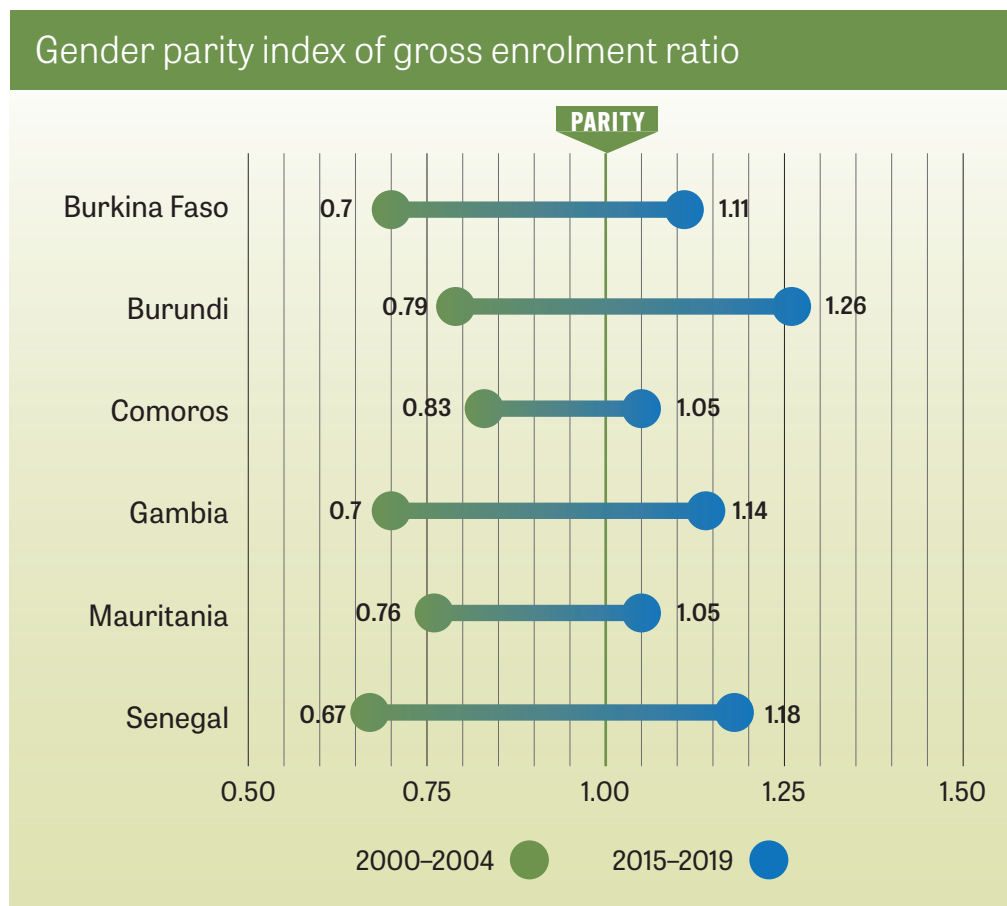


Figure 1 Countries in SSA where gross enrolment ratios at the lower secondary level showed a reversal favoring girls over the past two decades (UNESCO, 2022)

The use of corporal punishment is one underlying reason that boys are increasingly disengaged from schools and education.

As a recent review finds, the legacy of colonial institutions is fairly consistent across the SSA region in terms of schools' continued emphasis on hierarchical, authoritarian student-teacher relationships and aggressive masculinities (Dunne et al., 2021). Despite being illegal in most settings, eliminating corporal punishment or harsh physical discipline has proven to be challenging. Discipline in schools is highly gendered, and boys are frequently more likely to experience corporal punishment or hard physical labor as discipline.

Corporal punishment also impacts boys from poorer backgrounds more severely. For instance, in many parts of SSA, boys are sometimes punished for not being able to afford school uniforms or fees, or from not being able to complete school assignments because of their work commitments and from needing to earn and provide for their families. Younger boys tend to face physical punishment more often than older boys, while older boys and girls may face verbal abuse and insults as forms of punishment (Dunne et al., 2021).

In addition to corporal punishment, boys are also exposed to sexual violence at schools, especially at residential schools.

As boys grow older, in many settings they are sent to stay away from their families and homes they were raised in to be enrolled in residential faith-based schools. An interviewee mentioned how boys can often need to attend boarding schools temporarily, like in **Kenya**, where during examinations, boys often need to travel to stay at boarding schools since examination centers are not

widely available. Settings where boys live without adult supervision or monitoring can often create situational triggers and risks of sexual violence in their lives. School-related gender-based violence or SRGBV, while not a key focus of this report, is another important factor in boys' disengagement from schools.

A 2019 review by UNESCO shows widespread prevalence of bullying in SSA.

Around 48 percent of all students in the region had experienced bullying and around 37 percent had been in physical fights or attacks. Bullying based on physical appearance was found to be the most common form of bullying. Bullying based on race, ethnicity, nationality, or color was the next most common form of bullying, with 14 percent of all students across SSA reporting having experienced this. Boys typically reported experiencing physical bullying while

girls were more likely to experience psychological bullying (UNESCO, 2019). In **Ghana**, three in five girls and boys reported experiencing some form of bullying at school. Children from rural poor families are often bullied or "teased" for not having the appropriate school uniforms. Violence by peers is often exacerbated by teachers normalizing it or ignoring the bullying (Dunne et al., 2021).

Multiple factors affect boys' poor educational attainment in Lesotho

Lesotho in particular has one of the widest disparities between girls' and boys' educational attainment in the world, with a gender parity index of 1.25 in primary school completion. The differences are even starker by income levels. For every 100 of the poorest girls, only 67 of the poorest boys in the country complete primary education. Boys are an overwhelming majority of children who have never been in school: among children aged 6 to 12 who were out of school, 65 percent were boys. Social norms and traditions related to boys' initiation rites and entering a life of herding are big factors that keep boys from school. Remoteness of schools and lack of teaching materials are structural barriers that rural communities in Lesotho face in trying to access primary education. Corporal punishment is a significant cause for why boys tend to drop out of schools in this context as well. Finally, the lack of role models, drug use, and having little interest in education all play a part in keeping boys from education in the country (UNESCO, 2022, p. 56).

Box 4 Multiple factors affect boys' poor educational attainment in Lesotho

Violence in the home and in communities

School-based bullying and corporal punishment are only one source of violence in the lives of boys.

Boys growing up in SSA also face violence in their communities and in public spaces. Prevalence figures on child sexual exploitation are rarely collected globally, and even when they are, they tend to ignore or obscure sexual violence experienced by boys by focusing exclusively on adolescent girls (Economist Impact, 2022). In the Gambia, in particular, the fast-growing and under-regulated tourism and hospitality industries in the country have given rise to trafficking in persons and the sexual exploitation of boys. Boys in **The Gambia** are especially vulnerable

to sexual exploitation, as the high prevalence of child poverty and low rates of school enrolment in the country are both significant risk factors. Boys living in orphanages or other out-of-home care facilities are particularly at risk of being exploited sexually. Stigma around the issue of boys experiencing sexual violence, and strong traditional gender norms that define boys as capable of self-defense, make disclosure of incidents very unlikely, which is exacerbating the problem (ECPAT International, 2022).

Disclosures by boys of experiencing sexual violence tend to be less common.

Data from the Violence Against Children Surveys (VACS) show that disclosures of experiences of sexual violence as a child are low generally and lower for men and boys relative to women and girls (Together for Girls, 2023). With the exception of Côte d'Ivoire, Malawi, and Zambia, where rates of disclosure are either similar for both or higher for boys than girls, in most other countries boys tended to report their experience of sexual violence at much lower rates. This does not seem to be from a lack of

knowledge about services, since that is reported as higher among boys generally, but appears to be more driven by gender norms around boys' vulnerability to violence and exploitation. When looking at actual seeking and receiving of survivor services, the gap is even starker. In general, for girls and boys, rates of help-seeking are low, with no country showing even a quarter of girls or boys seeking services. But help-seeking among boys is much lower than among girls. Table 2 summarizes the data.

Table 2 VACS data on experiences of sexual violence as a child

Country	Percentage of 18–24-year-olds who experienced sexual violence prior to age 18 who:							
	Told someone about experience of sexual violence		Knew where to seek help for experience of sexual violence		Sought services for sexual violence		Received services for sexual violence	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Botswana	67.8	47.8	46.1	51.6	21.0	2.6	18.0	2.6
Cote d'Ivoire	46.3	45.7	23.8	26.6	3.8	2.5	3.2	2.5
Kenya	45.9	35.8			6.8	2.1	3.4	0.4
Kenya 2	41.3	26.7	34.8	34.2	12.5	3.2	10.7	3.2
Lesotho	40.6	20.5	41.7	55.7	12.0	<0.1	8.5	<0.1
Malawi	61.2	64.7			9.6	5.9	9.0	5.9
Mozambique	32.2	28.7	38.4	21.5		<0.1		<0.1
Namibia	50.0	31.2	43.7	56.9	10.5		9.7	
Nigeria	38.3	26.9			5.0	2.6	3.5	1.5
Rwanda	55.7	32.6	34.6	46.2				
Uganda	56.5	52.5			10.1	6.4	7.7	4.6
Zambia	51.6	51.4	19.8	24.6	1.4	7.2	0.0	7.2
Zimbabwe	51.8	45.1			4.3	2.4	2.7	2.4
Zimbabwe 2	60.8		39.8		17.1		14.3	
	Data not available							
	Sample sizes too small to calculate							

Boys’ experiences of sexual violence are exacerbated by a culture of obedience and respect for elders and by boys receiving less supervision at home.

In addition to stigma around disclosures, a study on responding to boy survivors of sexual violence from **South Africa** further explores some of the risk factors that are associated with experiencing sexual violence as a boy child. These included factors in the home, such as little adult supervision of online behavior or consumption of media; boys being less supervised than girls; and an absence of open discussion of sex and sexuality at home. Structural and

environmental factors included a culture of respect for and obedience of elders; absence of accessible childcare options in the community; lack of adequate survivor response mechanisms; high levels of family and community violence; and gender norms that viewed boys and girls as opposites or very different from one another and mothers especially as incapable of raising boys adequately (Clulow & van Niekerk, 2021).

Table 3 VACS data on witnessing violence both within and outside homes⁴

Country	Percentage (%) of 13–17-year-olds who witnessed violence in the past 12 months in:			
	Their home		Their community	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Botswana	10.3	56.9	14.0	60.6
Cote d’Ivoire	22.1	21.9	14.4	19.5
Kenya 2	34.6	22.4	22.4	21.7
Lesotho	18.9	14.4	8.6	13.4
Malawi	29.2	29.5	22.1	23.4
Mozambique	19.1	15.6	32.9	33.3
Namibia	17.8	15.1	28.0	31.8
Nigeria	44.9	35.0	26.8	25.1
Uganda	41.1	34.2	64.4	66.0
Zambia	25.7	20.3	24.4	20.6

⁴ See VACS country reports at <https://www.togetherforgirls.org/violence-children-surveys/>.

Regional data show high prevalence of young boys and girls experiencing or witnessing violence in their childhood.

Data from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) show a strong overlap between children who witnessed violence against their mothers by their fathers or other male adults in the home and children who themselves experienced violence. Nearly one in five men in **Nigeria** and **Mozambique** reported experiencing both forms of violence (Equimundo, 2022). Reports from the VACS from the region also show the high percentages of young boys and girls who have witnessed violence either within the home or outside the home in their communities over the previous year

(Together for Girls, 2023). While there isn't a clear gendered pattern across all countries, generally boys tend to report witnessing violence in the community more than they report witnessing it at home. In **Botswana**, in particular, nearly 60 percent of boys surveyed had witnessed some form of violence over the previous year. Similarly, girls in **Malawi** and **Kenya** report witnessing violence at very high rates with nearly one in three girls reporting they'd seen some form of violence outside or within their homes in the past year. Table 3 on the previous page summarizes the VACS data.

More work than play for many children

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), nearly one in four children across Africa are engaged in child labor.

Nearly 60 percent of all children engaged in labor are between the ages 5–11 years in the SSA region. Boys constitute 56 percent of children engaged in child labor in SSA, and this trend of boys representing a larger group of those in child labor is

true globally as well (ILO & UNICEF, 2021). However, it must be noted that if work done as part of household chores are included, then the gender gap among children in child labor narrows somewhat as girls do a higher proportion of housework.

Child labor across the region is most prevalent in rural settings, and primarily in agriculture.

Across SSA, boys and girls are much more likely to be engaged in child labor in rural areas than urban areas, with rural areas representing 82 percent of all prevalence of child labor in the region. Child labor is also overwhelmingly likely to be occurring in the family, with 82 percent of all child labor in the SSA region being part of working within the family.

This percentage is almost identical to those engaged in agriculture as well, describing that the picture of child labor in SSA is essentially boys and girls working in rural areas primarily in agriculture and usually working for their families. Anecdotally, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has also pushed many children into child labor across the region, most notably in **Ghana** and

Uganda (ILO & UNICEF, 2021).

Child labor bears a huge cost on children’s access to education – but schools themselves can also be sources of child labor.

Unsurprisingly, children being employed in labor comes at the cost of being able to participate in school: nearly 30 percent of all children engaged in child labor in the SSA region are out of school (ILO & UNICEF, 2021). However, schools can sometimes too be a site of child labor. Schools often put boys and girls to work on everything from cleaning the school premises to arduous tasks like fetching water or clearing the school grounds with machetes. Here too, there are gendered patterns, with girls

and younger children frequently doing a greater share of work than other children and being tasked with fetching water, firewood, cleaning toilets, and sweeping rooms. Boys are more likely to be asked to dig trenches, cut down trees, clean the compound and other heavy manual labor. Being in school in itself is not a protection from child labor, and sometimes the prevalence and heavy burden of child labor, especially in rural schools, can be a reason for children dropping out (Dunne et al., 2021).

Workplaces are also often sites of child abuse and exploitation.

In addition to keeping children from getting an education, workplaces can also be locations of violence against children. In a qualitative study from **Ethiopia**, young migrant workers describe how they were frequently refused pay or faced unfair deductions from their pay simply because they were

young and vulnerable and perceived as unable to stand up for their rights (Chuta et al., 2019). Children who come from the most marginalized or economically precarious backgrounds are most under pressure to earn a living and susceptible to abuse in the workplace.

Child labor occurs within the home as well.

Until recently, the conversation on child labor tended to underestimate the impact of work done by children within the household. The ILO began to classify domestic work or housework as “work” as recently as 2017 (Dunne et al., 2021, p. 21). The amount of domestic work that is expected of children in SSA tends to increase with age and can also depend on sibling birth order, other family

configurations like the presence of foster children, or migration. Frequently, assigning domestic work can also be a form of punishment for younger children. Finally, the way in which children are assigned domestic work at home can reinforce gender hierarchies that are normalized as they grow older (Dunne et al., 2021).

Gender norms around boys being self-sufficient and strong can contribute to normalizing child labor.

As one interviewee explained, boys in early adolescence are expected to be

strong and physically capable, and so their being employed in paid work is not

seen as unusual and harmful, which can open them up to exploitation:

But also, in terms of looking at paid work, boys in this age [ages 8–13] are also likely to experience lot of child labor without even people noticing because you are a boy so

go do this and you have the strength anyway. And something else with this age category is that they want to prove that they are so strong and so if parents are not watching then these children are also likely to be exploited. – Program coordinator of a regional NGO in Kenya, female

Raising rough and tough boys

Boys and girls face gendered patterns of violence in their homes.

In **Ethiopia**, a qualitative study from Young Lives, a unique longitudinal research initiative on poverty and inequality, reveals how definitions and acceptance of different forms of physical discipline of children can vary a lot across settings. In rural settings in Ethiopia, it was found to be more common for children to experience neglect and harm in the home along the lines of not having their basic needs of food, shelter, and schooling met, or not having an adequately balanced diet, or being deprived of owning property or assets. Corporal punishment was reported to be rare in rural settings. In urban

settings, however, it was more common for children to experience physical punishment, or being sent out of the home, or being beaten and locked up in the home. While both boys and girls faced different forms of harsh punishment, boys tended to be sent out of the house more than girls. Older boys described being denied food. Younger boys and older girls continued to face corporal punishment as adults were scared of older boys retaliating if they were beaten. Girls are also monitored, controlled and guided more than boys in this setting (Chuta et al., 2019).

Positive parenting practices can mean qualitatively different things across settings – but the use of violence against children is generally accepted as negative.

A qualitative review of parenting practices in **Ugandan** households also revealed how definitions of positive and negative parenting techniques can vary across settings and contexts (Boothby et al., 2017). From the qualitative analysis of themes in Uganda, some common notions of what parents thought constituted “positive parenting” included accompanying a daughter on the way to and from school; sewing a son’s clothes before he has to attend church; bathing

children; ensuring the use of mosquito nets; and planning and structuring study time in the evenings. Examples of what parents believed were “negative parenting” in this context included using violence, both verbal and physical, against children; not meeting children’s nutritional needs; leaving the children alone at home at night; not allowing children to play. While the study included some gendered analysis of expectations from parents – e.g., mothers were

seen as responsible for the children's hygiene while fathers were expected to provide materially for them – gendered

patterns of parenting with differences in expectations from boys and girls were not explored in this study.

The interviews also confirmed that fathers and children often tended to have less emotionally close relationships.

From the interviews conducted for this report, a respondent from **Kenya** recalled an anecdote from their local church where a youth pastor spoke to the children present about their relationship with their fathers and how this tended to be centered around provision rather than emotional closeness:

He asked the children 'has your father told you he loves you' and they told him their fathers cannot say they love them because they think it's a point of weakness. How can a man love? So, they say the only way they love us is by paying your school fees and by buying you food. They don't have that relation.
 – Executive director of a national NGO in Kenya, male

The focus on monitoring girls can have negative impacts for all children.

Another interviewee, from **South Africa**, described how among Black and Colored communities in the country, there was a general view among parents that girls need more attention. As a result, their mobility is more closely supervised and restricted and their friendships and intimate relationships much more strictly policed. On the other hand, the freedom that boys experience from lower involvements of adults in their relationships can make them more susceptible to peer pressure and feel neglected by the adults in their life:

... parents tend to use more negative ways of teaching girls about gender, about sexual reproductive health, about dating relationships, and there is work that needs to be done there to change that way of parenting. But if you compare it [to boys] that involvement of parents and society

and community in monitoring girls might mitigate the peer pressure they experience [...] with the boys just generally, they are given freedom to be outside of the home and they are seen as people who can go and navigate lives on their own outside in the street with very little involvement of our adults in their everyday lives, only seeing them when they come back in the evening at home. So, I think that the peer pressure that they have would likely not be mitigated in any way and if their peer pressure is negative then they are likely to follow that [...] because of limited involvement of an adult person who can really be there to support them and guide them through their boyhood. So, there is a lack of adult involvement in the lives of many boys. – Senior researcher, South Africa, male

On the other hand, boys are also raised from a young age to step into their role and status of power as men, and this reflects in how siblings are treated differently in the home.

For example, sisters are expected to serve their brothers, and boys are restricted from sleeping in the same room as their mother or sister. As an interviewee from **Kenya** described it, “girls and boys who grow up in the same family, the girls are expected to serve the boys. They bring them water to bathe,

serve them food, clean the utensils, wash clothes for their brothers.” Thus, while boys are often treated more harshly in terms of discipline and not nurtured or protected as much, they also are raised with the role of receiving care and service from their female relatives.

How boys are thriving

There are a few reliable measures of children’s well-being across SSA – albeit from a limited set of countries.

Three waves of the International Survey of Children’s Well-Being (ISCWeB) by Children’s Worlds have been conducted between 2014 and 2022 and include data from 8-, 10- and 12-year-olds from over 35 countries around the world, including from **Ethiopia, Namibia,**

Rwanda, South Africa, and Uganda in SSA. The survey asks children questions about their subjective well-being, time spent on various activities, awareness of rights, satisfaction with life at school and at home, among other topics.

Dinisman & Rees, 2014

Table 4 ISCWeB data on boys’ and girls’ reports on friendships

“I have enough friends”	Boys (%)	Girls (%)
Rwanda (ages 8–12)	33.54	44.62
Uganda (ages 8–14)	20.18	24.51
Ethiopia (ages 6–14)	49.33	56.18
Namibia (ages 8–14)	62.57	61.63
South Africa (ages 8–14)	58.21	56.97
“My friends are usually nice to me”	Boys (%)	Girls (%)
Rwanda (ages 8–12)	46.63	47.33
Uganda (ages 8–14)	27.08	29.83
Ethiopia (ages 6–14)	48.41	55.35
Namibia (ages 8–14)	41.07	39.78
South Africa (ages 8–14)	45.89	48.3

On general satisfaction with life, children from SSA tend to report lower scores relative to other regions.

For example, Ethiopia and South Africa ranked last and 11th respectively among 16 countries in the ISCWeB survey (Rees et al., 2016). From an older wave of the ISCWeB survey, Uganda lagged behind other countries on children's self-reported overall satisfaction with life (Dinisman & Rees, 2014). While cross-

country comparisons of subjective well-being scores sometimes can be difficult to interpret, it is worth digging into the reasons that children *within the same countries* might be reporting lower levels of satisfaction with their home, family, and school lives.

Some baseline data already exist on the importance and quality of friendships for children in the region.

On the question of friendships, only about 51 percent of all 12-year-old children responding in Uganda said they agreed that their friends were generally nice to them, while 76 percent said the same in South Africa (Dinisman & Rees, 2014). From a later round of the survey, in South Africa, 61 percent of all 8-year-olds said they "totally agreed" with this statement, and 57 percent in Ethiopia said the same. Qualitative research on the ways in which

children form, value, and assess their friendships at these ages across different contexts in SSA would be valuable in complementing these baseline quantitative data. Peer connectedness is important at every stage of the lifecycle but is especially influential for very young adolescents who are still forming their models and ideas for relationships which they will take with them through the rest of their lives.

Table 5 Survey responses on key issues facing boys

What are some key challenges 8 -13-year-old boys face in your context?	Percentage (n = 40)
Lack of comprehensive sexual education for boys	77.5
Boys' experience of violence outside schools	65.0
Absence of positive role models in boys' lives	65.0
Sexual violence involving boys	60.0
Social pressure on boys to be providers	60.0
Boys' experiences of bullying by peers	57.5
Negative impact of social media on boys' lives	47.5
Boys' experience of harsh punishment in schools	45.0
Boys dropping out from school for work	42.5
Boys' disengagement from education	40.0
Impact of HIV/AIDS on boys' lives	30.0
Cultural practices that keep boys from school	27.5

Girls and older children tend to report lower life satisfaction scores.

An analysis of predictors of children's well-being in the SSA region, using the same ISCWeB data, showed that several micro and macro factors affect girls' and boys' overall life satisfaction, with the strongest predictors being: gender (girls reported lower satisfaction scores); age

(older children reported lower scores); family relationship quality; and home context, which included questions about having a quiet, safe space to study, or having enjoyable interactions with family at home (Newland et al., 2019).

Other issues facing boys**Survey respondents felt effective comprehensive sexual education and the need for eliminating violence in boys' lives were the key issues in the region.**

Survey respondents were asked what they felt were some important challenges that boys between the ages of 8 and 13 in their contexts faced. A large majority of respondents chose a lack of comprehensive sexual education (CSE) as one of the key issues, followed by boys' experiences of violence (not in school contexts), and an absence of positive role

models to emulate. The responses are summarized in Table 5 on the previous page. Respondents were able to choose more than one response option. When asked to rank these issues, more people chose the absence of role models in boys' lives as their top-ranked issue than chose the lack of CSE.

Interviewees felt the absence of role models for boys was the key issue in their context.

From the in-depth interviews, the key issues that respondents identified resembled those from the survey, with the absence of positive role models being the overwhelming answer for many interviewees. This was also apparent in the absence of ideas around professions to pursue when they were older. As one interviewee put it:

So, I want to say that age 8 to 13 is a very confusing stage for many of the boys that we worked with. Many of them, if you ask them about their career, they don't know what they want to be; they don't know,

it's not clear. They really don't know what they want to be. I had an instance where I even asked some of the young people, the children, what do you want to do when you grow up, and one boy told me "when I finish school, I want to be a 'Madam'" – madam meaning a teacher – because in Kenya most of the lower primary is handled by old women teachers [...] you'll hardly find a young lady or a young man teaching lower primary. So, all the children know is a 'Madam'; it was very interesting. – Executive director of network of NGOs, Kenya, male

The absence of positive role models may lead boys to seek affirmation elsewhere, and this can sometimes create space for negative influences from peers or media. As one researcher from South Africa put it, “they will often seek out other male groups such as gangs where you find hypermasculinity.” Another interviewee also suggested that many children felt

the need to be validated by their fathers – “[there is] this deep-seated thing within boys and girls to have the father’s blessing and being affirmed by your father that you are good enough” – and that the absence of such validation from role models can potentially cause boys to look for identity and validation from more harmful sources.

Coming of age is associated with multiple challenges for boys.

Once boys reach adolescence or puberty, many join cultural initiation practices associated with transitioning into manhood where they may be removed from school and depended upon to work, herd livestock or learn a skill.

As a couple of the interviewees who spoke with us revealed, this is a time in their lives when boys may relocate to living on their own or in communal settings, such as boarding hostels, where they are without parental supervision and protection. They are exposed to many risks, including sexual abuse and exploitation, physical abuse, being used as mules for drug dealers, poor living conditions, lack of access to education, and lack of access to health services. Two interviewees described specific challenges that arise from boys needing to earn as they grow older:

In the small *maquis* [a type of restaurant in some West African countries] or small bars or restaurants in some countries, boys are used and exposed to risks and of course the challenges related to the context of insecurity that we find in the Sahel with armed groups, significant risks. – Program staff in West Africa, female

But also, at this age [8–13] children are exposed to child labor, especially the boys because in Nairobi, where we are working, we have street begging. The boys are sent out more to beg; to solicit money from strangers, but that also exposes these boys to a lot of emotional abuse, sometimes they’re physically abused and even sexually. – Program coordinator of a regional NGO in Kenya, female

In addition to needing to move away from home, the conflation of manhood and financial provision can cause feelings of hopelessness and desperation in boys.

Boys from poor communities, resource-constrained settings, and contexts with high unemployment or economic inequality are especially susceptible to this:

There is serious inequality in our country and for people who are at the wrong end of the spectrum things are getting worse for them. Their economies have collapsed completely, they are deep into

poverty. There are no jobs, and our economy is really struggling to produce job opportunities. I think that young people and young men are seeing that, and they are losing hope and, unfortunately, they will look at other ways of finding ways to

eat, to see themselves as men and not to be seen as useless men or boys. And unfortunately, those ways might be destructive ways and with detrimental effect to our society.
– Senior researcher, South Africa, male

Interviewees also spoke about boys' growing disengagement from education as another key issue linked to the prevalence of child labor, early and forced marriages, harsh discipline and peer pressure at schools, the influence of gangsterism, and less adult supervision.

Specifically, boys from the LGBTQIA+ community are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion, violence, and abuse; as well as boys on the move, who are exposed to child labor, insecurity, violence, exclusion from school and access to health care, and at risk of sexual abuse and sexual violence. Finally, the interviewees described that the exclusion of boys from most programming for children adds to their sense of vulnerability and feelings of being discriminated against. While several risks to children are equally present for girls and boys, child protection in particular was mentioned as an area where the gendered risks for boys are not addressed well in policy and practice.

When people talk about protection, when you see the government policies and strategy, you find that there is a government strategy for prevention of violence against women and children, but in terms of children then you find that, actually, basically it's a girl child that is the focus. – Executive director, civil society organization in Tanzania, male

A gender-synchronized approach to policymaking, research, and programming to address the specific risks for children of all gender identities when it comes to child protection was emphasized by several experts both in the survey and interviews.

Overall, boys face several challenges at the individual, interpersonal and structural levels as they come of age in SSA – and policies aiming to improve education access and gender equality must take these nuanced realities into account.

In many ways a grim reality awaits boys as they step out into the world, navigating the risks of various types of abuse and exploitation at home, schools, and in their communities; or needing to balance the pressure of finding work

and earning in the present against learning in school and improving their earning potential in the future. But many boys also experience greater freedom and choice at home relative to their sisters and most seem to have

close friendships and connections with their peers. Expanding child protection policies and gender equality programs to include boys along with girls will need to account for this mixed set of

experiences that boys growing up in SSA go through.



STEPPING INTO SOME BIG SHOES

I decided to dream again
not of walking on the moon or
inventing an umpteenth WMD
but of opening a sort of magical bar
and there to sell not drunkenness, or binges
but hope
I decided to be the one-man band of my days

From "*Kasala for Myself*" by **Fiston Mwanza Mujila**

In addition to the landscape of specific challenges that boys face, there is a world of highly gendered normative expectations that they are supposed to meet as boys grow older.

How are these ideas of masculinities understood and formed for boys in different context across the region?

This section summarizes some common features of masculinities in the region that emerged from the interviews, survey, and literature review,

including some insights on whom boys are learning about masculinities from.

This section wraps up with a deeper dive on how masculinities are formed in particularly precarious contexts, such as in informal urban settlements.

Box 5 Some key theorists and sources on African masculinities

Some key theorists and sources on African masculinities

In “Towards African-centered theories of masculinity,” Sakhumzi Mfecane (2018) details how theories of masculinities from the Global North are not adequate in describing masculinities in the African context, specifically in South Africa. Mfecane (2020) also uses the example of the Xhosa culture from South Africa to make the urgent call for decolonizing knowledge and theorizing on masculinities in this region.

A helpful compilation of African perspectives on masculinities has been created by Ratele and Richardson (2021) who maintain a regularly updated exhaustive compendium of journal articles, dissertations, books, book chapters and reports on the topic. Ratele’s (2021) “An invitation to decoloniality in work on African men and masculinities” is a useful entry point for this literature. *From boys to men: Social constructions of masculinity in contemporary society* (Shefer et al., 2007) is another accessible summary of research on masculinities in the South African context.

Features of dominant and alternative masculinities

Dominant masculinities vary across the continent – but have a few common features including responsibility as providers, authority, and heterosexuality.

From the qualitative interviews, some key aspects of dominant masculinities included viewing men as: responsible for financial and material provision; holding power and authority over, as well as enforcing discipline and protection of, women and girls; and being heterosexual, virile, and

strong, often with many wives and partners. Homosexuality continues to be considered an alternative form of masculinity and marginalized in discussions on masculinities across the region. It is sometimes perceived as a “Western influence” and a threat to masculinity within the region. Even

where alternative masculinities emerge, they can often exclude children and youth with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. With laws against same-gender relationships continuing

to exist in over 30 countries across the African continent (Hlabana et al., 2021), the impact of homophobia and transphobia is significant on young boys and their formation of masculinities.

An example of alternative masculinities in school settings

From the literature review, a qualitative study with boys aged 10–12 years old at a primary school in Durban, South Africa, describes interesting alternative and dominant masculinities in this setting. In a context marked by widespread poverty, boys who come from households with “a bit of money” can often don the role of “cheese boys,” with the term “cheese” as a signifier of “the good life.” These boys are perceived as clever, non-violent, friendly with girls, and with a complex relationship with the more dominant masculinity of the “bosses” who both acknowledge the superior status of the cheese boys due to their relative wealth, but who also bully and subjugate these boys to assert their dominance. Cheese boys therefore must continually define and navigate complex alternative masculinities where they resist violence from the bosses, maintain friendly relationships with teachers and girls, distinguish themselves from “gay” boys, who form yet another distinct alternative masculinity that is subjugated by most other groups (Bhana & Mayeza, 2019).

Box 6 An example of alternative masculinities in school settings

Who are boys learning about masculinities from?

Different and sometimes contradictory sources of ideas around masculinities abound for boys aged 8–13 in the sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) region.

When asked about who the key influencers were in boys learning about boyhood, masculinity, and gender relations, survey respondents overwhelmingly chose “parents.” About 90 percent of respondents believed parents were a key source for boys forming ideas on this topic. The next most selected response was that of “peers” with about 80 percent of respondents choosing this. Around 70 percent of respondents each chose “teachers and coaches” and “spiritual leaders,” which were the two next

most-common responses. “Community leaders” and “media celebrities and social media influencers” were chosen by about 65 percent of respondents, and fewer than 25 percent of the respondents felt “political leaders” were an important source of learning about masculinities for young boys. Respondents could choose multiple responses for this question and their responses are summarized in Figure 2.

Sources of learning about masculinities: percentages

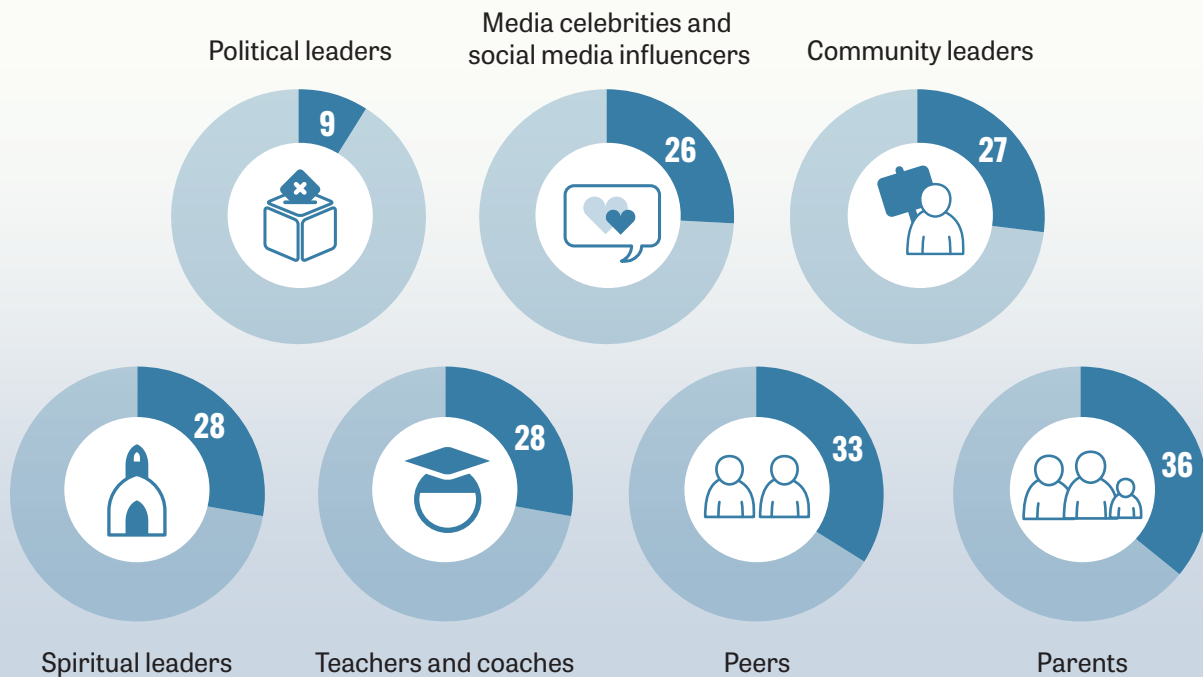


Figure 2 Sources of learning about masculinities

From the qualitative interviews, the most significant sources of learning about gender and masculinity in the region emerged as families in general, including fathers, biological or social ; schools; religious institutions; traditional and social media; NGOs; and cultural practices.

Parents, particularly fathers, biological or otherwise, act as the first role models for boys. Across the board, interviewees working in **Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Senegal**, and other parts of rural West Africa said that a primary source of learning about what it means to be a boy and grow up into a man is learned from the family, and particularly from an adult male involved in raising the child. In South Africa, in particular, interviewees noted that nuclear families are not the norm, and it is not always

only the biological father who plays this role, but it could be an uncle, a grandfather, or other social fathers who step into caring for and raising young boys. As one interviewee put it:

The social father is a father surrogate who is often the grandfather or an uncle but can also be played by teachers and by sports coaches, by ministers in churches, youth pastors. – Chief executive officer of an NGO, South Africa, male

Schools tend to reinforce traditional gender norms but have the potential to be spaces for learning differently.

Schools are spaces where young boys and girls already are prepared for roles that they are expected to fill as they grow older. This can be reflected even in how work is assigned within and outside the classroom.

If we look at roles that are assigned in our schools, for example, [...] the boys will be told to slash [cut grass and weeds]; the girls will be told to go for water in rural setups. In the urban areas, probably they will be told to do the cleaning when the boys will be told to play, and girls will be told to stay behind and do the cleaning.

– Program coordinator of a regional NGO, Kenya, female

Schools can also be positive sources of learning about gender and gender roles. During one **interview**, a respondent shared examples from South Africa, specifically with young boys in schools in KwaZulu-Natal province⁵ or in parts of the Western Cape, in Cape Town, where programs on modeling positive masculinities are being implemented through schools. For many children, such programs at schools may be the only source of learning about positive, non-stereotypical forms of masculinities.

Cultural rites of passage and initiation practices are also widely regarded as important expressions of manhood and sources of learning on the topic.

Traditional rites have centered around circumcision, but there are emerging religious practices that are also designed to support boys in their transition to manhood. As one interviewee described it, initiation rites can both be a source of knowledge for boys, but also give them an exaggerated sense of agency and preparedness for sexual relations that perhaps boys are actually not ready for:

Circumcision is sometimes [...] done between age 7 to 10. So, once they are circumcised this comes with a “package” of information, because now you are given a symbol

of power. They are even told ‘now you’re ready to make a girl pregnant’ [...] And that’s why now, in certain areas where cultural initiations take place, they also realize they also have high rates of teen pregnancies or child marriage because these boys believe that now they have the power, they can marry, they can take care of a family, they can fend for themselves. Too much power is pumped into them to make them just believe that now they have transitioned, they are no longer children and that they are adults.

– Program coordinator of a regional NGO, Kenya, female

⁵ See the work of Deevia Bhana for more: <https://soe.ukzn.ac.za/staff-profile/sarchi-chair/deevia-bhana/>

Masculinities in informal settlements

Early gender socialization of boys is especially critical in precarious settings.

Boys grow up learning about gender norms and roles across all settings, but when their everyday lives are especially precarious, such as in informal low-income urban settlements, this

process can be especially fraught. Boys being able to survive in such settings can depend on them being able to successfully navigate expectations and pressures on them.

Masculinities in informal settlements can often be more fluid than elsewhere.

An ethnographic study from the **Democratic Republic of Congo** (DRC) over three years followed a group of 19 boys between the ages of 13 and 18 living on the streets of Bukavu. The authors describe how a fluid “mosaic” of masculinities form in such a context. On the one hand, the boys are subjected to hegemonic masculinities, through power wielded by authority figures like police and soldiers, or by adult fishermen who are the primary income-earners in these localities and use their power to inflict abuse on boys and steal their possessions. On the other hand, the boys themselves aspire to dominate others and have complex power dynamics with each other. Some boys replicate the violence they experience from older men

on those younger or less powerful in their own group. But they also maintain friendships and sexual relationships with other boys in their group and demonstrate care and love for each other, offering protection and sustenance in a world that is only safe and secure for moments in time. As they grow older and become adults, these boys learn to navigate the constant push and pull of submission and dominance and seek to challenge their subordinate position with regard to the adult men around them. For boys who live on the streets, the daily precarity of their lives have altered the hierarchy of their needs to essentially “eating food, having sex, and avoiding violence” (Hlabana et al., 2021).

Even though the lives of boys growing up on the street are different from those growing up in homes, there are many similarities in the way masculinities are formed in these settings.

Another participatory ethnographic review (van Blerk, 2012) from Berg-en-See in Cape Town, **South Africa**, follows a group of 12 boys of ages 11 to 18 and uses a relational approach to describe how the connections that children living on the street have with their caregivers, families, and peers are not fundamentally different from how children growing up

in homes form those same connections. Boys' understanding of families in this context described both intergenerational and intragenerational relations and tended to highlight the primacy of the male adult household head. The boys described both their biological families and their community families in similar terms:

My family is at home: my mother and father and sisters ... but this is my family sitting here too. – Arturo, 12 years old

Family's on the street. My brothers [biological siblings] and my friends are on the street. – Martin, 15 years old

The study describes how street relations and family relations are sometimes merged and sometimes in opposition

An example from Kenya shows that boys and young men even in extremely precarious settings continue to imagine kinder lives for themselves that are free from violence.

A study (Izugbara & Egesa, 2020) on aspirational masculinities that interviewed young men from Korogocho and Viwandani slums in Nairobi, **Kenya**, paints a vivid picture of masculinities formed under conditions of extreme precarity and threats to life and property. Pressures to be the breadwinner, not show emotion, and perform heterosexuality continue to be the main forms of aspirational masculinity. However, despite the constraints of circumstances that these youth face, they continue to also aspire to be better men than their fathers, provide for their families, return to school, access better work opportunities, and so on. “Respectable manliness” was equated with being able to move out of the slum and into lives of more economic and social opportunities. The youth also aspired to be “better men” by being “nobler protectors” and “worthier providers” for their family, imagining lives where they would be much more involved in raising their children and be in non-violent, caring relationships with their spouses

but with similar power dynamics that emerge in both contexts. Power in the context of these communities is structured around gender, age, and birth order in both the street and home contexts. The study calls for using a more holistic approach when it comes to conceptualizing boys’ formation of masculinities in such a context where street lives and home lives are not necessarily two separate spheres (van Blerk, 2012).

and families. While homosexual men occupied a lower status among men in these two slums, a majority of those interviewed did not express negative attitudes toward them. As a participant from one of the focus group discussions from the study expressed it:

There are men and boys who have sex with each other here. That’s how they want to live. We really don’t care much about them. That’s their life. Sometimes, people attack them, especially their parents and relatives. But our problem here is not how people live their private lives. Our problem is how to have a future, to change our conditions and improve our life. (Izugbara & Egesa, 2020, p. 13)

The youth from these slums in Nairobi were fully aware of the stereotypes and generalizations about them, as well as the real material constraints on their lives, and yet continued to construct aspirational masculinities that broke free from these stereotypes.

Intimate relationships and expectations

Hopes and expectations of intimate partner relationships are often studied with older groups of boys and girls, but very young adolescents are also being socialized on what roles they are expected to play in intimate relationships.

A review of gender norms around adolescent relationships across SSA which focused on ages 10 to 14 found that girls typically were socialized to be more submissive in relationships, and boys to be more risk-taking and demonstrating greater agency and initiative. Boys were given much more freedom to explore and experiment sexually, while girls' sexuality was much

more policed. By age, the review found that across different studies younger adolescents were more likely to endorse inequitable gender norms than older adolescents. Adolescents who had experienced partner violence and early sexual debut were more likely to endorse inequitable norms as well (Maina et al., 2021).

Gender norms within intimate relationships play out very differently for young boys and girls.

Gendered norms and expectations for boys encouraged them to experiment with sex at earlier stages, engage in multiple sexual relationships, and view girls and women as subjects to be won over, and other behaviors that increase the risks of poor sexual and reproductive health (SRH) outcomes for boys and their partners. In the context of rites of passage across SSA, male

circumcision and similar practices are often an important pathway for behaviors that increase risk of poor SRH outcomes for young boys and girls. Rites of passage can often prepare boys for sexual activity and encourage early sexual debut without the requisite awareness or knowledge to avoid negative SRH outcomes (Maina et al., 2021).

Parents and caregivers of adolescents in SSA, like in many other regions globally, find themselves ill-equipped to initiate conversations about sexual and reproductive health.

In a review (Usonwu et al., 2021) of parent-adolescent communication on adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) focusing on ages 10-19, the authors found that parents often start these conversations from a place of fear and worry about negative consequences like unintended pregnancies. Adolescents across these studies expressed the need and desire for reassurance and comfort

from adults in their life about body changes during puberty and about relationships at this age, but adults typically responded negatively including using threats, warnings, misinformation, demands, and other scare tactics. Abstinence was the primary method that was recommended and taught by parents and this discouraged sharing of accurate information about different contraception methods. One of the main

A case study from Kenya on norms around formation of intimate relationships among young adolescents

From the literature review, a qualitative study with boys aged 10–12 years old at a primary school in Durban, South Africa, describes interesting alternative and dominant masculinities in this setting. In a context marked by widespread poverty, boys who come from households with “a bit of money” can often don the role of “cheese boys,” with the term “cheese” as a signifier of “the good life.” These boys are perceived as clever, non-violent, friendly with girls, and with a complex relationship with the more dominant masculinity of the “bosses” who both acknowledge the superior status of the cheese boys due to their relative wealth, but who also bully and subjugate these boys to assert their dominance. Cheese boys therefore must continually define and navigate complex alternative masculinities where they resist violence from the bosses, maintain friendly relationships with teachers and girls, distinguish themselves from “gay” boys, who form yet another distinct alternative masculinity that is subjugated by most other groups (Bhana & Mayeza, 2019).

Box 7 A case study from Kenya on norms around formation of intimate relationships among young adolescents

reasons for this lack of communication between adults and their children was the level of confidence and comfort that parents felt about the topics. Parents reported low self-efficacy, mainly from not having enough knowledge or communication skills to broach the topic of ASRH with their children. Fathers reported feeling inept at this more than mothers, and fathers typically were absent from such discussions with their teens. In terms of content of what was discussed, diverse sexual orientations and gender identities were rarely if ever brought up. Topics related to LGBTQIA+ adolescents and their sexual health and rights were sorely missing from these

conversations (Usonwu et al., 2021).

A qualitative study (Gupta et al., 2021) from **Rwanda** that focused on older adolescents, aged 18–19, reported similar dynamics at play, such as parents' hesitation to talk about adolescent relationships and their general disapproval of any intimate romantic or sexual relationships their adolescents may be engaging in. The absence of parents talking about ASRH and the lack of reliable and trusted sources of information on the topic were found to be big gaps and unmet needs in the context of Rwandan adolescents (Gupta et al., 2021).

Young boys across SSA are choosing and modeling different roles for themselves as they prepare to be men and prepare specifically to be men in intimate relationships.

Sources that they learn from can be contradictory – sometimes nurturing and supportive, and sometimes harsh and demanding. Boys must navigate

these stepping stones of expectations, both their own and others', as they enter adulthood.



STEPPING UP AND DREAMING BIG

I'm tired of this strength. Let me be bereft,
watching the white limousine as it drives away.

From **Kayo Chingonyi's** "*How to cry*"

I got a lot of questions
But no one to ask
A lot of jokes
But no one to tell them to
I really need a friend
A friend indeed

From "*As I stood dead before the world:
Creative writing from Luzira Prison*"

How are boys responding to the landscape of challenges and specific issues that await them as they come of age?

How is the sometimes-heavy burden of expectations from society on boys affecting their own expectations and dreams for the future? This section delves into boys' own hopes, aspirations, and dreams for themselves as described by researchers and practitioners who work with them. Future studies on boyhood in the region would

ideally also reflect the voices of young boys themselves in describing their aspirational masculinities like some studies summarized in this report have done. The section also describes promising approaches in working with boys that help them prepare for the world they are entering.

Aspirations of boys

Respondents to the survey were asked to describe in a few words or phrases what boys (ages 8 –13) in their contexts aspired to.

Financial stability and security, along with money, economic security, and related phrases appeared overwhelmingly among the terms or words used. The words “providing” and “provider” also appeared frequently. This reaffirmed the conflation of boys and masculine ideals of being

the breadwinner or responsible for financial security. However, the next biggest group of words or phrases that appeared across responses was that of “family” or “families.” “Friendships”, “peers”, “community” or “communities” were all among the most frequently used words to describe the

Figure 3 Most frequently appearing words when describing boys' aspirations



aspirations of boys, reflecting the very high importance of relationships and connectedness that boys feel the need for in their lives.

Among clusters of ideas that were also reflected from these responses included a set of words expressing feeling recognized, validated, and

respected. Like all social beings, young boys also want to be accepted among their peers and within families and communities, and being granted autonomy and empowerment also appeared as part of the idea of validation and status.



Figure 4 Words used by survey respondents to describe boys' desire for acceptance and validation

The occupations and jobs that found their way among the survey participants' perceptions of boys' aspirations included professional football player, celebrities

in general, artists, teachers, and cattle rustlers. Some respondents also mentioned owning property or owning a home of their own as aspirations.

From the interviews, boys between 8–13 were described as aspiring to succeed, to become celebrities (soccer stars, singers), to adventure and overcome challenges, and to earn and provide for their future families.

In instances where the father may be absent or where there is economic hardship, such as for children on the move, the desire to provide financially may extend to their current families, including mothers and siblings. Birth order can affect the aspirations of, and expectations placed on boys, with more emphasis on the first born than the last born:

But when you find a situation where it is the boy who is the last born, obviously, they're spoiled. If he is the first born, there's too much expectation on him because you are the big boy and you need everything. And if you are the young one, you are the last born, then your mother spoils you so they grow up not knowing themselves completely. – Executive director of network of NGOs, Kenya, male

Survey respondents and interviewees described the aspirations of boys and girls they work with as being similar at younger ages and growing further apart with age.

Children are prepared along traditional gender lines from a young age through the toys they play with, to the roles they see modeled, to the narratives they hear and tasks they are assigned. Both dream of success and, at the onset of adolescence, around ages 8–13, become more aware of the expectations on them and begin to anticipate their futures. Whilst this space has increased for girls over the past decade, there has not been a similar growth for boys and

even some indications of shrinkage. Girls of this age group were described as achieving better at school, occupying more leadership positions, and being more protected and supervised by their families. *It is also important to remind here that this report reflects the experiences and expertise of researchers, program staff, and activists who work with young boys and girls and these are not the voices of boys and girls themselves.*

Expectations of boys and girls

The interviews described that expectations are placed on boys from many different spheres.

One of the interviewees described an ecosystem of expectations placed on boys with the community and state at one level; and parents, peers, and teachers as another source of expectations. These expectations from different sources may not always be congruent, and this can place additional pressure on boys:

The schools – they expect that the boys learn and that they get an education and that’s mostly then not congruent with what the peers would think of the boys. And, also ... I think what the school and what the parents think and what the community think, I think there’s also a clash and that links back to what I mentioned earlier; that a lot of parents expect the boys to bring back income to home and, of course, schools they expect that the boys are studying and that they

go to school regularly. – Senior education researcher, UN agency, male

The responses from the interviewees around societal expectations from boys mirrored the survey responses about boys’ aspirations with most describing financial provision, starting a family, and building a house. These common aspirations for boys are in keeping with largely traditional, patriarchal roles that they are expected to fulfil as they grow older. Interviewees noted that while expectations for girls had been changing faster in recent years, these have not changed as much for boys. As interviewees based in West Africa described:

What we have observed is that there is a reason to have a job or training or to create income that takes up more space among girls

than before. – Program staff, West Africa, female

We told ourselves that the women could not work. Then we saw that in some areas that were reserved

for men, women succeeded and little by little families saw that if boys can do it, why not girls, and so it has evolved. – Program staff, Senegal, female

In South Africa, the consequence of the pressure to provide financially in challenging economic situations was described as being particularly difficult for boys.

As an interviewee elaborated:

Society expects that men should work, men should provide even in contexts of dire situations and extreme poverty; men are still expected to make means, to provide. There's very little consideration of where and how, and the man who is unable to provide materially is then not seen as a man, is questioned. And I think that men see this, and boys as well, and their dreams and aspirations, their goals, get dashed and, unfortunately, it's leading to dejection. Dejection can lead to poor mental health, and poor

mental health can lead to ways of surviving that are very negative or disruptive, like violence and engagement in negative sexual practices or behavior. – Senior researcher, South Africa, male

The previous section on masculinities described how masculine ideals are formed in different contexts across SSA and the discussion about aspirations and expectations from boys also reflected that these continue to shape boys' own dreams for themselves, as well as what is expected of them and of girls from adults around them and from society at large.

Programs that engage boys

Through the literature review, interviews, and survey, quite a number of programs were identified that currently engage boys in gender equality and positive masculinities in some way or another.

[Annex 2](#) in this report summarizes these programs. Generally, from the literature review, interviews, and survey, it appears there have been few programs in the past in the SSA region that worked with boys of ages 8–13 as a specific target group. Often, male engagement in gender programming is added on as a component to programming designed with women and girls as

the primary participants. However, in recent years, an increasing focus on boys' issues, specifically around their declining performance in school and disengagement from education, has created the impetus for boys-specific programming or gender-synchronized approaches that work with children of all gender identities as a core element of program design.

Many programs with boys use sports-based approaches to appeal to the target age group.

For example, MENtorship implemented by The Character Company and The Boy Child Initiative implemented by loveLife are two programs in **South Africa** that use sports as an entry point to initiate discussions on gender roles with young boys of ages 5–10, and aged 10 and older, respectively. A few programs also seek to work with boys' caregivers, such as Stepping Stones with Children that was

originally developed in **Tanzania** and adapted across different countries in eastern and southern Africa. Stepping Stones focuses on children of ages 5–14 affected by HIV and their caregivers to build life skills and knowledge of issues related to HIV/AIDS while questioning and unlearning gender norms in participatory ways.

Some programs also use arts and media as ways to generate critical reflections and discussions to change norms around masculinity.

An example of such a program is Fathers Matter, implemented by Heartlines in **South Africa**, which centers discussions around films to explore and promote positive, involved, and non-violent fatherhood. loveLife and Primestars Digital are two other organizations in

South Africa that use a documentary about boyhood and masculinities to facilitate reflections among youth (boys and young men of ages 10–24) on caring masculinities that are not characterized by hypermasculinity and the use of violence.

Social and behavior change communication (SBCC) campaigns are a popular way to reach boys and the adults in their lives.

The She Leads program in **Kenya**, implemented by the Kenya Alliance for Advancement of Children, engages leaders in the community to act as champions who publicly challenge existing inequitable gender norms and promote girls' and women's leadership in the community. While adolescent girls are the primary target group, adolescent boys of ages 14–18 and young men ages 18–35 are also engaged as key allies and partners in the process of promoting women's leadership in the community. The Growing up GREAT! intervention in the **Democratic Republic of Congo** (DRC) is another example of a multi-pronged intervention that

includes an SBCC component. The program targets boys and girls of ages 10–14 to build sexual and reproductive health (SRH) knowledge and skills while building equitable gender attitudes. The SBCC component involves engaging parents, teachers, and other influential members of the community in meaningful dialogue to shift unequal gender norms. Early evaluations of the program show promising results, including reductions in perpetration of bullying among boys (Institute for Reproductive Health, 2021).

One key aspect missing from program approaches, as noted by an interviewee based in South Africa, was that cultural practices like traditional dances or initiation rites were not integrated into programmatic approaches that sought to engage boys.

There is often not enough funding to include contextually relevant and culturally appropriate ways of reaching boys and youth at the design stage and this can keep programs from reaching their audience.

Box 8 Lessons from a program with very young adolescents in Malawi

Lessons from a program with very young adolescents in Malawi

The [Very Young Adolescence \(VYA 2.0\) program](#) was developed by Equipundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice in collaboration with the University of Malawi College of Medicine and implemented by the Centre for Alternatives for Victimized Women and Children. VYA 2.0 was implemented in six schools in the Blantyre and Chikwawa districts of Malawi before being cut short by COVID-19-related school closures. It was aimed at engaging 1,500 very young adolescent boys and girls (ages 10–14) in questioning, recognizing, and challenging harmful gender norms and unequal power dynamics, with the aim of promoting gender equality and improving SRH. VYA 2.0 was a 12-week curriculum that included group discussions, roleplays, debates, and other play-based sessions to promote critical reflection

on gender norms and how these norms impact very young adolescents' well-being. The VYA 2.0 curriculum was designed for implementation in mixed- and single-gender groups, depending on the sessions, and as an after-school program using trained facilitators. The sessions provided a safe space for boys and girls to challenge and transform harmful norms of masculinities and femininities that perpetuate gender inequality and violence.

Several factors contributed to the successful implementation of the program. These included effective recruitment and training of facilitators, relevant program content, and thoughtful stakeholder engagement. A rigorous selection process and adequate facilitator training helped produce skilled and knowledgeable facilitators, who were essential to the success

of the program. Additionally, continuous monitoring and supervision support improved facilitators' understanding of adolescents' backgrounds and needs and their group dynamics. This strengthened the trust between facilitators and adolescents that was key to creating safe spaces that allowed thoughtful, enjoyable, and critical discussions. VYA 2.0 was designed for the Malawian context, which was key to the success of the program as adolescents and facilitators easily understood the new concepts in the curriculum and found them relatable. Additionally, the program engaged several stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and community leaders in other activities outside the school, which complemented the in-classroom component of the program.⁶

6 For more information on this program and its implementation in Malawi, visit: <https://www.equimundo.org/valuable-lessons-learned-from-adapting-and-implementing-a-program-for-very-young-adolescents-vya-the-malawi-experience/>.

From the survey, about 60 percent of respondents said that there existed programming in their country or region where there was work being done with boys around positive masculinities and gender equality.

When asked what they felt was missing from programs that worked with boys, the most-common response (38 percent of the respondents) was that “programs do not engage boys’ caregivers.” About 30 percent of respondents chose that “robust evaluations” of such programs are currently missing and required. The next most-common response was that programs “do not meet boys’ aspirations or needs” with 28 percent

of respondents having chosen this option. A third issue was that gender equality was not a strong focus as a goal of such programs working with boys. Some of the “other” responses on this question included: “Masculinities are not sufficiently addressed” and that “programs need more robust learning agenda on positive experiences and projects.” The full set of responses is summarized in Table 6.

Table 6 Survey respondents on gaps in programming with boys

What is missing from programming with boys?	Percentage (%) (n = 40)
Programs do not engage boys’ caregivers	37.5
Programs need more robust evaluations	30.0
Not meeting boys’ needs or aspirations	27.5
No strong focus on gender equality as a goal	22.5
Programs do not work with boys and girls	20.0
Programs are not scalable or sustainable	17.5

Interviewees mentioned that work with younger boys and out-of-school youth was missing in programming with boys.

In terms of topics that were missing, interviewees mentioned the following: livelihoods strengthening and economic development; life skills and resilience; addressing women’s roles in upholding gendered social norms; issues and

rights of the LGBTQIA+ community; preparing boys to enter careers that are not traditionally considered masculine, such as the care sector, among others.

The Global Boyhood Initiative

Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice (formerly Promundo-US) and the Kering Foundation created the Global Boyhood Initiative (GBI) in 2020, in partnership with Plan International, as a first-of-its-kind initiative to promote healthy and equitable masculinities starting from an early age, using approaches specifically developed to engage boys (ages 4 to 13) and the adults in their lives, and by leveraging appropriate media to inform and mobilize the communities and systems that influence and shape boys. This report forms part of current research being undertaken within the GBI. For more information on this initiative, visit <https://boyhoodinitiative.org>.

Box 9 The Global Boyhood Initiative



CONCLUSION

Current research and programming on gender equality in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) often lack a specific focus on boys aged 8–13. The literature on masculinities in the region often takes sexual and reproductive health or HIV/AIDS as a starting point, leading to a focus on older boys and men. This report attempts to synthesize the current discussion on how boys are growing up with ideas of masculinity, specifically, starting relationships, connecting with peers, and taking their place in the world from across diverse sectors like education, child protection, child labor, and other areas of research, policy, and practice. Summarizing findings from a literature review, online survey, and in-depth interviews, the key takeaways and implications for future formative research and program design in the region include:

- Learning how to engage younger boys and very young adolescents in research and programming on positive **sexual and reproductive health** attitudes and behaviors using age-appropriate and contextually relevant methods is a current need reflected by practitioners in the field.
- Understanding the various influences who serve as **positive role models** of masculinities for young boys, and how best to have these individuals use their influence to model equitable gender attitudes and behaviors is a key strategy in effecting behavior change.
- Rights of children with diverse sexual orientation and gender identities (**SOGI**) and **LGBTQIA+ rights and issues** in general are not covered in most programming and policy. There is an urgent need to develop SOGI-inclusive content that is both sensitive to a context where laws and practices still stigmatize LGBTQIA+ people, but that also pushes forward the goal of inclusion and equity for SOGI-diverse children.
- Using a **strengths-based, positive approach** in framing gender and masculinity programs and policies is sorely needed. Boys should not be described or viewed only as a source of trouble and problems, but with their true potential of contributing positively to their relationships and communities and their own well-being.
- Both **gender-transformative** and **gender-synchronized** approaches in programming and policy are key to avoid pitting girls and boys against each other or viewing gender equality as a zero-sum game. The same structural barriers and inequitable gender norms negatively impact the lives of girls, boys, and children of all gender identities and keep them from achieving their fullest potential. Reducing these barriers helps progress the rights of all children.
- Making **school environments** more welcoming to boys and girls, including by addressing the prevalence of corporal punishment,

bullying, risks of child labor, and other forms of abuse, are key to stemming the growing disengagement of boys from education across the region.

- Including **young boys** in the designing and decision-making of programs and policy that affect their lives is crucial. Boys' own aspirations, goals, and voices need to be included in any efforts to engage them, both to protect and further children's right to expression and to be effective in working with boys.
- An **intersectional** lens in all research, programming, and policy initiatives is also key as the issues that face young boys in different contexts across the region are very different: masculinities in urban informal settlements can look very different from those in rural contexts; the lives of boys impacted by poverty

differ greatly from those who are economically secure. Considering age, race and ethnicity, economic security, sexuality and diverse SOGI, urban or rural locations, and disability status, is important in any program or policy design to reach the right audience.

There is strong enthusiasm from researchers, activists, and program teams across different countries in sub-Saharan Africa in continuing to build the momentum on including younger boys, from ages of 8 to 13, in the conversation on positive gender socialization, and in supporting them to explore, formulate, and realize their dreams and goals while growing up to be active allies for women and girls in the progress toward gender equality.

ANNEX 1: METHODOLOGY

In-depth interviews (IDIs) and qualitative analysis

Interviews were completed with eight senior subject matter experts from the sub-Saharan African (SSA) region, including academic researchers, child rights advocates, and senior program staff working on child development issues. Interviewees were identified by references from existing Equipundo partners in SSA. The interviewees were based in Kenya (2), Senegal (2), South Africa (2), Tanzania, and France. Interviews were done in English (6) and French (2). Interviewees were asked about how masculinities were currently understood in the region; the specific

challenges, dreams, and aspirations of boys in their context; and their insights on current research and programming with boys in SSA. The IDIs were recorded in English and French, translated (if required), and transcribed. Transcribed data were imported into Dedoose. Thematic analysis was performed using an initial coding scheme based on themes arising from the interview guide questions and then inductively extended. Final coded excerpts per theme were exported to Excel to inform the data analysis.

Online survey and quantitative analysis

The online survey was completed by 40 respondents from 14 countries, including Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, France, the Gambia, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda, UK, USA, and Zimbabwe. Respondents were selected using snowball sampling and included program staff, academics,

activists, advocates, writers, and other creatives. The survey was offered and completed in English (32) or French (8). The survey questions were similar to those asked in the IDIs. Survey data were downloaded from SurveyMonkey and cleaned and analyzed using Stata 17.

Literature review

The literature review was done primarily in English with a limited search for French sources. The approximately 90 sources included peer-reviewed articles, technical reports, existing datasets. Studies focused exclusively on girls, or on ages beyond the scope of this report (ages 8–13), were reviewed but not

included in the final report unless they had specific insights on boys aged 8–13. Studies focused on countries that are not categorized “sub-Saharan Africa” by the World Bank were excluded. Studies were published in 2010 or later with a few exceptions mentioned in the bibliography.

ANNEX 2: PROGRAMS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA WORKING WITH MEN AND BOYS ON GENDER EQUALITY

The literature review identified several useful sources with reviews of country-specific or regional programs that are not summarized below: McCloskey et al., 2016; Maina et al., 2021; ECPAT International, 2022; Pike, 2020; UNICEF, 2021; Girl Effect, 2020; Three Stones Consulting, 2022; and Weber et al., 2017.

The table below summarizes programs mentioned during the in-depth interviews and surveys and links to the relevant websites.

Table 7 Summary table of programs working with young boys across SSA mentioned in surveys and interviews

Countries	Program	Implemented by	Program type	Setting	Audience	Program approach and goals in short
40+ countries in Africa	Akili and me, Ubongo Kids, and Akili Family	Ubongo	Edutainment, SBCC campaign	TV, radio, social media platforms	Children (ages 3-14) and their caregivers	Uses locally created edutainment to improve children's numeracy and literacy, interest in STEM, and other child development outcomes.
Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia	Yes, I Do	Plan International and partners	Multi-pronged approach including SBCC campaigns, advocacy, capacity building	(Varies by country)	Adolescent girls and boys primarily	Uses GTA to reduce child marriage and teenage pregnancy while promoting adolescents' SRHR.
Various	Stepping Stones with Children	Project Empower, South African Medical Research Council	Group-based education with peer facilitators	Small group sessions	Children affected by HIV/AIDS ages 5-14 and their caregivers	Uses arts-based GTA to promote resilience, positive relationships, SRHR knowledge with the aim of preventing violence and HIV/AIDS.
Democratic Republic of Congo	Growing up GREAT!	Save the Children and partners	Multi-pronged approach: group sessions, capacity building, SBCC campaigns	Multiple	Children (ages 10-14), caregivers, teachers	Uses GTA to improve adolescents' SRHR by increasing their knowledge and self-efficacy while promoting positive gender attitudes.
Kenya	She Leads	Kenya Alliance for Advancement of Children	SBCC campaign using role models such as influential community leaders	Community centers, media	Children (ages 14-18), media centers	Works with media to share feminist narratives and promote positive masculinities through male gender "champions."
Liberia	Accelerated Quality Education	Education Development Center	Capacity building of government schools	Schools	Out-of-school children, ages 8-15	Aims to transform gender norms to increase education access for out-of-school children with a focus on girls.
Rwanda	Boys for Change	Plan International	Group education	Refugee camps	Boys of ages 12-17	Aims to transform gender norms to reduce violence against girls, decrease substance use, and promote boys doing more care work.
South Africa	Fathers Matter	Heartlines	SBCC campaigns	Community centers, church groups	Fathers and male caregivers	Promotes active, caring, non-violent caregiving and fatherhood for children especially during the early years (ages 0-3).
South Africa	MENtorship and Moms Support	The Character Company	Long-term mentorship and coaching; social support groups	Community centers	Boys starting ages 5-10 and single mothers with sons	Uses sports and 1:1 mentorship to role model positive masculinities for boys. Creates peer support groups for single mothers with sons.
South Africa	The Boy Child Initiative	loveLife	SBCC and advocacy campaigns	Youth centers	Children and youth ages 10-24	Uses sports, arts, media to promote positive masculinities for better adolescent SRHR.
South Africa	What About the Boys	Primestars Digital	SBCC campaign	Schools; digital platforms	Boys in grades 8-12	Uses films and SBCC materials to change gender norms to prevent GBV.
Tanzania	The Good School	HakiElimu, Raising Voices	Capacity building, SBCC campaign	Schools	Teachers, students, community members	Leads institutional change processes to prevent SRGBV.
Uganda	Journeys through Uganda	RTI International, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)	Capacity building	Schools	Primary school students, teachers, community members	Builds schools' capacity to prevent SRGBV including boys' experience of corporal punishment and sexual harassment.

Abbreviations: GTA = Gender-transformative approach. SBCC = Social and behavior change communication. SRHR = Sexual and reproductive health and rights. GBV = Gender-based violence. SRGBV = School-related GBV.

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